

Christopher Holmes

HIST 4230: Age of the Reformations

From Reformation to Martyrdom

“William answered, ‘I would that you and I were even now fast tied to a stake, to prove whether that I or you would stand strongest to our faith.’”¹ Here, William Hunter answers Thomas Wood, a vicar in the Roman Catholic Church, regarding his question, “canst thou serve God with heresy?”² John Foxe’s work *The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church* demonstrates a shift in the method of argumentation between Protestants and Roman Catholics. That is to say, that *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs* illustrates—explicitly in William Hunter’s statement above—a change in the focus on theological debate to, in a manner of speaking, “trial by death.”

The transformation from theological focus to the endurance of death as a strategy for disputation has taken place in just under fifty years (since the beginning of the Protestant Reformation, when Luther posted his 95 theses) and is even exemplified in Hunter’s exchange with Atwell and Wood. Hunter’s interaction with the two Roman Catholics bears similarities to this overarching progression in the Protestant Reformation. For instance, Hunter’s intercourse with Atwell begins with Hunter’s reading of the Bible, at which Atwell balks. Yet Hunter’s reading of the Bible, which brings him into adverse interaction with the Roman Catholic Church, correlates with Martin Luther’s experience at the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. Luther, too, read the Bible, sought to understand it, and to derive comfort from it (and in time, he did). However, Hunter’s ordeal differs in that he is not the first to engage in debate—the roles

¹ John Foxe, “The Acts and Monuments of the Christian Church” (1563)

² Foxe, “Acts of the Church”

are reversed when Atwell, the Roman Catholic priest, confronts Hunter, the Protestant about his reading the Bible.

Nevertheless, other elements of Hunter's encounter bear resemblance to Luther's. Hunter finds the Bible in a place of religious worship, a chapel, and Luther does so at a monastery, a place of religious worship and service to the Church. Moreover, Hunter resembles Luther when he reads the Bible for his own personal comfort—a personal experience which is contrastable with Luther's “anfechtungen,” and comparable with Luther's declaration that his conscience was bound to the Word of God. Their respective experiences also share broader parallels that continue to showcase the slow (for the Protestant Reformation—Hunter's trial escalates quickly) shift from theological disputation to martyrdom.

Both of Hunter's confrontations—with Atwell and Wood respectively—begin with theological discussion, particularly as it concerns the Bible and the Eucharist.³ Then, after some time attempting to convince Hunter of their position, Atwell and Wood resort to calling Hunter a “heretic.”⁴ Their tactic of attack here parallels with the next phase of the Protestant Reformation, wherein Luther made art depicting the Pope as the antichrist, and Roman Catholics did the same portraying Luther as a fool. While such argumentation seems immature to some today, it nevertheless was intended to have serious effect during the time of the Protestant Reformation—namely, to charge the opposing side with heretical doctrine or service to the devil so as to draw people to either Protestantism or Roman Catholicism. This is, presumably, what Atwell and Wood intended when escalating from discussion to attacking Hunter with labels. Even so, Hunter continues his steadfast resistance, at which point Hunter says, “I would that you and I were even

³ Foxe, “Acts of the Church”

⁴ Foxe, “Acts of the Church”

now fast tied to a stake, to prove whether that I or you would stand strongest to our faith.”⁵

Although execution is inevitable for stubborn “heretics” around this time, Hunter’s words demonstrate an intriguing way of both thinking and arguing. That is, Hunter’s words display his thought that endurance through torment and death would reveal the truth—if Wood, a Roman Catholic, endured rather than Hunter, it would prove Roman Catholicism right (if the view were held consistently), but if Hunter withstood (as he plainly thought he would, and did end up doing), then Protestantism would be proven to be true.

In the end, though, Hunter’s idea that enduring martyrdom for one’s convictions establishes the truth of the matter is, at least in one sense, inconsistent with reality. Both Roman Catholics and Protestants, as well as many other kinds of professing Christians in prior and later centuries, would suffer much and be martyred for their beliefs. Notwithstanding, Hunter’s thought does illuminate an idea that perhaps endures even today, as Christians and people from other religions continue to suffer persecution on account of their convictions.

⁵ Foxe, “Acts of the Church”